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## Reunited in Miami

# Tearful Holiday Cheers Greet Returning Cubans

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Staff Reporter

MIAMI, Dec. 23—Cuban captives from the Bay of Pigs invasion arrived here by the busloads tonight to receive a tearful, joyous Christmas welcome from thousands of relatives and friends.

Soon after their arrival by plane, the ex-prisoners were taken by chartered buses to Dinner Key Auditorium. Each time groups of ex-prisoners filed out of the buses at the hall entrance, thunderous applause broke out, quickly dissolving into a pandemonium of screams and sobs of reunion in a sea of waving Cuban flags and handkerchiefs.

Fathers, mothers, wives and sweethearts strained against policemen, who locked arms and cleared a path for the men to the speaker's platform.

The men marched into the hall, searching the crowd for relatives, happily accepting hugs and handshakes from complete strangers.

The crowd cheered as the men mounted a platform draped with American and Cuban flags, the invasion banner and a giant Christmas tree. The national anthems rang out over public address systems. Blue and pink balloons floated overhead.

Dressed in khaki uniforms the men stepped up and were introduced, then were swallowed up by the loved ones who wept hysterically as they kissed and embraced, the

fathers and brothers exchanging the Latin "abrazo"—a bear-hugging, cheek-kissing, back-slapping embrace.

Red Cross medical trucks treated about 100 women from hysteria. Several fainted from excitement.

Carrying her child, the wife of one freed prisoner scrambled onto the stage and threw herself into her husband's arms.

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arms while misty-eyed photographers and television cameramen had a field day.

Isabel Hernandez, clinging to her husband after a 20-month separation, said: "Do you hear how loud my heart is beating? I never thought I would live to enjoy such happiness."

Another young woman, Merida Lopez, wept silently but alone—her husband had been killed in the invasion.

"I'm so happy for the others," she said. "I feel that

my husband has come back too."

A young father hugged a baby son he had never seen while his wife sobbed with joy.

Another father, healthy but somewhat pale after the long imprisonment, laughed when his wife said he looked thin. "I'm exhausted," he said, "but I can still pick you up." And he did, to the delight of the crowd.

As a Spanish-speaking announcer paid tribute to the prisoners, one re-united couple stayed locked in an embrace while everyone around them cheered.

"We thought we had lost you," a mother wailed, half in tears, half in smiles of relief.

A woman nearby fainted when her husband's name was read over the loud-

speaker from a list of prisoners still to come.

Each invader carried a small bag and wore a chain with a white tag around his neck. Some carried prized relics from long months in Cuban prisons—carved crucifixes, a handmade nativity scene of reeds.

Many of the prisoners were jaunty and beaming as they moved from one knot of friends to another.

An honor guard, comprised of members of the invasion force who had not been captured, 60 prisoners who were released earlier this year, and Cubans who had enlisted in the U. S. Army, stood at attention at the edge of the crowd.

Tension reached a crescendo after the first bus unloaded its heroes. The crowd began to shout: "Viva the members of the 2506th Brigade" (which led the invasion). Viva the

Great United States. Viva Senor (James) Donovan. Viva Free Cuba!"

Despite the cheering, the applause, the waving Cuban flags and handkerchiefs, and the hysteria of some, the crowd remained remarkably disciplined.

Buses were waiting as the first planeload of prisoners arrived at Homestead Air Force Base near Miami shortly after 3 o'clock.

The men were quickly processed and had a meal. After eating, officials permitted a brief interview with the press, but forbade discussion of conditions during their imprisonment.

One prisoner said: "This is like a dream. I still cannot believe it."

The few parents and relatives allowed on the base reached over the rope barriers and embraced the men.

Among all the joy of the welcome, there was an undercurrent of melancholy.

No one had forgotten that thousands of other Cubans were still wasting away in Castro's prisons, not eligible to be pardoned, while many others were in their graves.

Reports that the 1113 prisoners would start arriving at the base early today sent about 3000 exiles hurrying to the Dinner Key auditorium for a huge welcome home celebration scheduled to take place after the men had completed processing.

Anxiety began to spread as the day dragged on. In Cuba, Castro was insisting on a thorough check of the \$53 million in food, drugs and medical supplies being exchanged for the men.

The checking of the items on arrival, however, apparently took more time than had been expected, holding up the release. Castro, it seems, wanted to make sure he was not being cheated in the bargain.

The 10 American Red Cross representatives originally sent to help with the checking reported they were overworked, so four additional ones were flown to Havana early in the afternoon to speed the process.

Finally, with expectation and anxiety mixed to a peak at the auditorium, the first plane arrived, and the biggest welcome in Miami's memory began.



The first act of Cuban war prisoner Reynaldo Rodriguez, after he stepped from the plane onto U. S. at Homestead Air Force Base last night, was to kiss the ground, as shown in this picture.